

EPA Plans New Fuel-Economy Tests

By KAREN LUNDEGAARD
And LAURA MECKLER

The fuel economy rating of the Toyota Prius or other hybrid you may be considering will soon look a lot worse than advertised—up to 30% worse.

The Environmental Protection Agency announced new rules aimed at making fuel-economy labels posted on car window stickers more accurate, beginning with 2008 model-year vehicles.

The familiar labels have long overstated vehicle mileage, making most cars and trucks look more fuel efficient than they actually are. The new plan would incorporate new testing to devise a more accurate number. “We are bridging the gap between the sticker estimates and the fuel economy drivers get on the road,” said EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson.

For example, **Toyota Motor Corp.’s** sold-out Prius hybrid, one of the top-performing vehicles in terms of fuel economy, would go from an estimated 60 miles a gallon in the city to between 42 and 48 miles a gallon. David Hermance, executive engineer at Toyota’s U.S. Technical Center who works closely on the hybrid program, said Toyota, the leader in hybrid sales, still supports the changes. “Any improvement in customer communication is a good thing,” he said.

Specifically, new tests will account for a variety of factors that take a toll on real-life mileage: use of air conditioning, acceleration and operation of a car when it is cold outside. After these factors are considered, mileage estimates are expected to drop by 10% to 20% for city driving and 5% to 15% for highway driving for conventional, gas-powered cars and trucks.

The drop would be much more significant for the popular new hybrids, which use a combination of gas and electric motors to achieve better mileage. The new estimates would be 20% to 30% lower for city driving and 5% to 15% lower for highway driving, Mr. Johnson said. He added the new tests are necessary since cars, roads and the way people drive are much different than they were in 1985, the last time EPA adjusted the calculations.

People drive faster and cars are equipped with more technology, including commonplace air conditioners, which degrade fuel economy.

The change is not likely to damp enthusiasm for hybrids, predicted Thi Nguyen of Fresno, Calif., who owns two hybrids, a Prius and a Ford Escape. Mr. Nguyen said neither hybrid gets the mileage advertised, but neither do nonhybrid vehicles. He welcomed the EPA adjustment.

The agency has been considering revisions to the calculations for several years.

It even considered a wholesale overhaul of the labels, perhaps eliminating the separate city and highway numbers for one combined figure. But focus groups showed that consumers were used to the city and highway designations and didn’t want those changed. They just wanted more accurate numbers. Four proposed new labels can be seen at www.epa.gov/fueleconomy.

The proposed regulation will be open to public comment for 60 days.

Auto makers, which have been working with the EPA throughout the process, had mixed reactions to the announcement. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a Washington-based trade group that represents most of the major auto makers, said in a statement that it would work with the EPA on the new system, while expressing concern that the new testing could be “cumbersome.”

David Raney, senior manager of environmental and energy affairs for **Honda Motor Co.’s** U.S. operations, said while the auto maker supports the adjustments, he worries that the new tests will discourage advanced technologies.

Dan Becker of the Sierra Club complained that the more realistic mileage numbers will be used for consumer information but not to determine auto-maker compliance with fuel economy regulations. “We believe they should fix the test for all purposes,” he said.